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Live in Your Head – and Keep Translating!

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The non-finito, the unfinished, is a notion that began to grow in importance at the very end of the 19th century in the visual arts: Hans Belting has claimed that it is a concept central to the modern work of art that it can never quite attain to completion.¹ Being modern equals with having *projects* also according to Boris Groys.²

Modernity signifies continual striving toward a state of imagined perfection – for my favorite 19th century art critic and writer Walter Pater all the arts continually aspired toward becoming music, toward feeling and process. To the contemporary reader, Pater’s continual striving brings to mind the Lacanian *objet petit a* and makes art closely related to desire. In ‘The School of Giorgione’, Pater imagined life itself as duration and pure process, “as a sort of listening — listening to music, to the reading of Bandello’s novels, to the sound of water, to time as it flies”.

It is only the very literalist mind, which insists that projects should be brought to completion. In the early 1920s Marcel Duchamp declared that his ‘desiring machine’, the Large Glass – *La mariée mise à nue par ses célibataires, même* – was left *definitively unfinished*. In his notes, published in the facsimile editions, the first of which was *La boîte verte*, by his transgender alter ego Rose Sélavy, the process could continue to go on forever as the scribbles on bits and pieces of paper could be endlessly rearranged.

By the 1960s, the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934) had become assigned reading in the American art schools and colleges. For Dewey, art was all about processes and living, except that in the arts processes were never brought to the final stage of consummation – as the *objet petit a* can never quite be reached. Happenings and events as processes of ordinary living performed simultaneously as ‘art and ‘not-art’ – Allan Kaprow’s legacy – derive, in part, from his immersion in Dewey’s aesthetics.

The Duchampian gesture of the *definitively unfinished*, the idea that the work of art is in a constant state of becoming gradually gained more importance as artists began to question the aesthetic implications of his more sensationalist ready-made strategies.

¹ *The Invisible Master-Piece: The Modern Myth of Art*. Translated by Helen Atkins, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

² ‘Comrades of Time’, *e-flux journal* #11 (December 2009) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/> retrieved May 30, 2015.

Both Dewey and Duchamp had been influenced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson for whom duration, *la durée*, was a way to thematize the constant flux of experience where memory, perception and anticipation are constantly interlaced and ultimately indistinguishable from one another. Bergson's *durée* indicates that there is another, invisible, side to the Modernist obsession with the idea of totalizing space, and that this other side is related to the heterogeneity of the experience of temporality and duration.

If Minimalist aesthetics can be seen as celebrating the idea of spatiality and objecthood then what came to be called *process art* foregrounded the temporality of experience and the ambivalence of duration. In the late 1960s, processes and dematerialized practices became the new norm as young artists embraced the flow of experience in their work.

In 1969, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* at the Bern Kunsthalle and *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art were the first exhibitions of work that did not necessarily materialize in objects. The latter showed work, or rather procedures and processes, by artists, performers and composers. Richard Serra, for example, came to the Whitney without any finished work, bringing with him lead as material and a saw to work it with, and Eva Hesse only brought materials that she could use to fabricate works by herself, without resorting to any technical procedures.

It is interesting to notice that both these exhibitions are currently being revisited in discussions, symposia, and as re-stagings such as the 2013 Fondazione Prada exhibition in Venice.

When Rosalind Krauss reflected on the process art of the late 1960s and early 1970s she believed she could perceive “an erosion of representation and a trauma of signification” as the main catalyst for what she called “the indexical regrouping of art in presence”.³

But how is *presence* to be understood if it is not already interwoven with past and future and mediated by artistic signs and systems of signs transferred by different traditions of artistic discourses? Even if artistic processes remain difficult to articulate are they not still part of much larger signifying systems of artistic discourses which evolve *in time*?

For Bergson, the only means, which were available for the philosopher to express his or her thought were provided by science and the history of philosophy. Bergson described the philosopher's thinking as unending movement, originating from *a simple intuition*. The philosopher seeks to express this originary intuition by different approximations, translation after translation, but ultimately it is this

³ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October* Vol. 3 (Spring 1977), 68-81.

never-ending process of translating which constitutes the expression of his thought.⁴

Marcel Duchamp called his *La mariée mise à nue par ses célibataires, même* also a *delay in glass*. By specifically evoking the deferred/anticipated actualization of the Large Glass he emphasized its thematic connections both to the multiplicitous temporality of the *durée* and to the continual distancing of the object cause of desire, *objet petit a*, and suggested that a work of art is a perhaps just a transition between the artist's intuition and its expression, an approximation, a possible but necessarily inadequate translation of the intuition. And, correspondingly, perhaps the *objet petit a* can also be seen as metaphoric of the simple intuition at the 'origin' of the work of art – the 'origin' toward which the continual process of translating strives?

Perhaps a work of art cannot be anything other than *definitively unfinished* – ?

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4 'L'intuition philosophique', *La pensée et le mouvant*, 1938, 117-142.

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